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ABSTRACT

With the federal role in education changing rapidly, regional education agencies are best suited to engage in school improvement efforts by designing cooperative arrangements among other educational organizations. Although planning such a collaborative interorganizational relationship (IOR) seems to require both appropriate structures among member organizations and methods of communication that encourage shared decision-making, a sample of IOR's in Massachusetts shows that the interaction processes were of more importance than organizational structures in determining a collaborative relationship. The type of coordinating structure chosen for an IOR depends largely on the extent of school system input in the decision-making process. Although resources available to member organizations can also be coordinated to save money and improve service, such cooperation requires clearly specified units of exchange and terms of reciprocity. Moreover, each organization's domain must be specified in problem-solving activities of collaborative IOR's. (JW)

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NEW WAYS OF PLANNING FOR NEW REALITIES: THE COLLABORATIVE OPTION

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NEW WAYS OF PLANNING FOR NEW REALITIES: THE COLLABORATIVE OPTION

Introduction

The federal role in education has changed dramatically over the past year, and it will continue to do so as the provision of educational services and programs is delegated to the states. Upon receipt of consolidated block grant monies, the states will need to decide how they will allocate those resources and which education agencies will assume responsibility for which educational function. While these new arrangements are becoming defined, there has been some concern expressed about the future of the school improvement activities that were formally the major focus of the federal government. What education service unit --the state education agency (SEA), the regional education agency (REA) or the local education agency (LEA)-- will have the ability and flexibility to fill this projected school improvement service gap? Because the SEA and LEA will have immediate responsibility for continuing existing educational programs, it is, in my judgement, the regional education agency that is best positioned to engage in school improvement efforts most immediately. Indeed, Yin and Gwaltney (1981) view REAs as a "national resource:"

> The REAs also present a significant opportunity for policy action because they exist in all regions of the country. Furthermore, they have had a stability of operations over time and have not been transient arrangements. The arrangements have not been based on the assumption of long-term federal support, but have merely been supported by state and localfunds. In short, REAs enjoy both political and bureaucratic legitimacy. (p. 16).

The delivery of educational services within each state is typically the shared responsibility of a configuration of SEAs. REAs and LEAs. Since about 1960, regional education agencies have been formed in a number of states; they have as their primary function, it is reported, cooperation with state education agencies and local education agencies in the delivery and improvement of educational services (Friedman and Alonso, 1976). Stephens (1979) has identified three different types of REAs: (1) the Special District ESA -- a legally constituted unit of school government sitting between the SEA and a collection of LEAs; (2) the Regionalized SEA/ESA --a regional branch of the state education agency; and (3) the Cooperative ESA --a loose consortium of LEAs that offer cooperative services (pp. 1-2). What all these REA types have in common is that their work is accomplished by the formation of formal and informal inter-organizational arrangements among education units that wish to offer collective school improvement services.

Thus, regional education agencies are organized around the concept of collective action and presently use inter-organizational cooperation to deliver services. It is the thesis of this paper that REAs have the opportunity to capture the full potential of their unique position in the educational system by designing inter-organizational arrangements that have a collaborative focus. In this kind of inter-organizational relationship (which I will now refer to as IOR), member organizations have a perceived commonality of purposes or interests that allows them to collaborate, and thus to sponsor joint programs and activities. Because member organizations define themselves as inter-dependent, they agree to participate in a shared decision-making process, in order to accomplish the functions and goals of the IOR. In

essence, the planning of collaborative IORs by regional education agencies will create the inter-organizational environment necessary to accomplish school improvement activities.

Today I will present guidelines that REA administrators may follow in order to establish a collaborative IOR. They were developed from the research that I have conducted over the past four years, designed to identify the conditions that are necessary for successful inter-organizational collaboration. One study, of interest to this audience, was of voluntary educational collaboratives in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts (Intriligator, 1978). In these collaboratives, local school systems joined together to collectively organize and deliver programs and services to their respective constituencies that they could not deliver independently. As part of the inter-organizational arrangement, the local school systems formed new collective organizations, with their own staff, budgets and policy boards. These new organizations are called educational collaboratives, and are very similar to one type of regional education agency --the Cooperative ESA-- in both their structure and their operations.

The major finding of that study was that successful collaboration is dependent on the nature of the relational behaviors among IOR member organizations; furthermore, IOR planners must make a deliberate effort to define the nature of the interaction processes in such a way that the goals of the educational collaborative can be accomplished in a collaborative manner, that is using shared decision-making processes. Indeed, true collaboration was found to be the most difficult and the most predictive element in the design of an effective inter-organizational relationship.

Planning A Collaborative IOR

Planning a collaborative IOR calls for attention to be paid to two major aspects of organization design: (1) the development of an appropriate inter-organizational structure through which linkages can be developed among member organizations; and (2) the delineation of processes of inter-organizational interaction that will facilitate shared decision-making. I will selectively review some of the features of IOR design that are most relevant to the needs of administrators of REAs in this presentation, and will be glad to expand on any other area during our discussion period.

Structural Characteristics of The Collaboratives

The IORs in the Massachusetts study were of three kinds: (1) well-established collaboratives that had evolved over the years a number of different IOR purposes, or superordinate goals --the multi-purpose collaborative; (2) collaboratives that had been established by local school districts in order to help them respond to the requirements of the state special education legislation; they had been in existence at least ten years and had developed a number of special education programs --the multi-program collaborative; and (3) relatively new inter-organizational arrangements in which IOR members had joined in order to accomplish a single service delivery purpose --the single-program collaborative. Indeed, there is a long history of voluntary collaboration among school districts in the state; typically these experiences are viewed as worthy of school system involvement, that is that school districts could receive what they needed in exchange for participation in the IOR.

The governance structures of the collaboratives varied according to the different legal bases upon which the inter-organizational relationship was

formalized. In this state there are two state laws that encourage the development of IORs: (1) Chapter 797 offered financial incentives from the state budget for school system participation in IORs, and therefore established guidelines for board composition, financing and inter-district responsibility; and (2) Chapter 180 allowed voluntary educational collaboratives to function under a non-profit educational status. In addition, these collaborative IORs had no formal connections with the state education agency, or its regional offices. Also, they were favored by local school superintendents as a strategy for accomplishing some service goals; therefore, many school systems held multiple memberships in a number of different IORs.

In sum, the sample of collaborative IORs included in this study were divided into three structural types. Initially, it was felt that each of these models of organization and governance would use different IOR interaction processes. What we found was that the requirements for interactions that would have a collaborative focus were the same for each structural type, and that, in fact, the single-program IOR was an simply an embryonic form of the multi-program IOR. Multi-program IORs subsequently developed into well-established multi-purpose IORs. Therefore, it was not the structural arrangement that was the important variable in determining a collaborative relationship; rather, it was the nature of the interaction processes among member organizations that was the most predictive element in building a collaborative inter-organizational relationship.

Types of Coordinating Mechanisms in the IOR

Selection of an appropriate coordinating mechanism is central to the success of a formal inter-organizational relationship. There are a number

of possible coordinating mechanisms for an IOR. Member organizations may chose to formalize the joint effort by the development of a contract that clarifies each member's role, responsibilities and organizational domain. Members may also chose to create a new organizational entity (similar to the Massachusetts collaboratives) that would be responsible for the administration and planning of IOR programs and activities. Another alternative is for member organizations to plan IOR activities cooperatively, but with the agreement that the proposed activity would belong primarily to one member. This arrangement, for example, is common in IORs composed of business organizations and school systems that sponsor new vocational education programs -- the businesses provide technical assistance and the educational programs are typically conducted by the school systems. As a final example, member organizations may decide to conduct all IOR functions and activities collaboratively, with all parties assuming mutual and equitable responsibility for IOR planning and operations. This latter coordinating mechanism is, of course, the most appropriate option for designing an IOR with a collaborative focus. (See, for example, Baker, 1981; Chin, 1974; Crandall, 1977; Dalin, 1977; Paul, 1978.)

The selection of a particular coordinating mechanism is mediated by a number of cultural and inter-organizational factors; however, it is influenced most importantly by the strength of the REAs belief in the professional value of school system input into the educational decision-making process. Similarly, school systems must indicate respect for REA involvement in their local educational decision-making processes.

Reinterpretation of Available Resources

For a number of reasons, educational institutions today are faced with

a fiscal situation of decreasing organizational resources. The consolidated block grant funding strategy of the federal government not only changes the process of apportioning federal dollars for educational programs and functions, but also reduces the amount of federal dollars available to state and local agengies by at least 25%. In addition, local tax policies have sharply cut into educational budgets. Thus, it is unlikely that any of the member organizations in the IOR --regional education agencies or local school systems-- will be able to make a substantial financial contribution to the cooperative arrangement.

Therefore, IOR planners must redefine the nature of resources that they will consider as appropriate member contributions to the collaborative effort. First, use of facilities and contributions of staff time need to be recognized as legitimate resource contributions to the inter-organizational arrangement. Second, functions of the IOR might be identified in terms of eliminating costly duplication of specialized services in each of the member school systems. For example, the IOR might facilitate the collaborative training of principals in how to accomodate handicapped children in school buildings. If the schools pool their resources and deliver services cooperatively, they may in the long run both save money and improve the quality of service.

In sum, the changing resource environments of educational institutions seem to have caused a re-evaluation of what constitutes a significant resource contribution to an IOR, and broadened the definition to include more than financial contributions as powerful indicators of commitment.

Characteristics of the IOR Interaction Processes

If the inter-organizational arrangement is to have a collaborative focus,

then the ways in which the member organizations will relate to each other must be carefully defined during the planning process. Some of the factors that help define the relationships among IOR members are related to the nature of the exchange process that occurs in the inter-organizational relationship.

Aspects of The Exchange Process. IOR members exchange goods and services with other participating organizations in the inter-organizational arrangement. There are several aspects of the exchange process that influence the degree of cooperative interaction that can be attained in the IOR. First, member organizations expect the units of the exchange to be clearly delineated --that is, they expect the relationship to be standardized. Marrett (1971) suggested that the standardization of inter-organizational relationships requires attention to both the units of exchange and the procedures for making the exchange. In fact, the institutionalization of a formal coordinating mechanism in the IOR depends on a reasonable degree of standardization of the exchange process; members need to know what the units of exchange will be and how repetitious (or predictable) the exchange process will be (Intriligator, 1978; Litwak and Hylton, 1962).

School system members of the educational collaboratives in Massachusetts agreed on the importance of standardized relationships to a successful cooperative interaction. They indicated that the following relational behaviors contributed to stabilizing the units of exchange in their collaborative IORs:

- Members have equal voting rights in the planning and the coordination of the collaborative's activities
- Member organizations jointly establish procedures for governing the IOR

These behaviors describe the standardization aspect of the inter-organizational exchange process.

The number of joint interactions and the amount of resources (that is, people, programs, services and funds) that are allocated directly to the IOR by each participating organization are both indicators of the intensity of the exchange process in the inter-organizational relationship. Members of the educational collaboratives contributed monies to the IOR based on a per-pupil formula. In addition, most of the superintendents of school district member organizations served on the policy boards of the IORs --except for the single-program collaboratives where the Director of Special Education was the school system representative to the board. Also, school system representatives, the superintendents, attended an average of ten collaborative meetings each year. These were all considered to be relational behaviors that indicated the intensity of member commitment to the IOR. In addition, these school superintendents identified the following two behaviors as important:

- The collaborative staff director meets with advisory subgroups composed of representatives of member organizations at least four times a year
- Formal IOR communication processes are jointly developed by all members of the IOR

These behaviors describe the intensity aspect of the inter-organizational exchange process.

Finally, the intensity of the exchange process that guides inter-organizational relationships is influenced both by the extent to which the terms of the exchange are mutually reached, and by whether or not the exchanges are viewed as reciprocal.

The inter-organizational exchange process, then is further defined by a voluntary and reciprocal transfer of resources between and among members. School system representatives in the educational collaboratives affirmed the needs for these relational principles of interaction and also identified the following reciprocal behaviors as necessary to a successful IOR:

- The collaborative's staff director serves as a broker in mediating reciprocal exchanges among member organizations
- Member organizations have an equal opportunity to be involved in the activities and programs of the IOR

In order for an IOR to have a collaborative focus, then, the decision-making and communication processes must be two-way. All member organizations must believe that they can make input that will be valued and used.

In sum, there was a general agreement by member organizations that the collaborative arrangement depended upon standardized, intense and reciprocal exchange behaviors that needed to be delineated during the IOR planning process. Indeed, interactions among IOR members are defined by bargaining processes that are dependent upon exchanges through which the actors in the IOR negotiate on behalf of themselves and on behalf of the organizations that they represent (see, for example, Adams, 1979; Elmore, 1978; Intriligator 1978). This may be a particularly useful guideline for REA administrators who wish to plan an IOR in which the regional education agency is the dominant member in the inter-organizational relationship.

Patterns of Influence in IOR Interactions. In addition to the aspects of the inter-organizational exchange process, patterns of influence present in the relationship must be agreed upon in the planning of the IOR interaction processes. Each member organization's domain must be acknowledged, and consensus must be reached on organizational prerogatives in defining and operationalizing IOR goals and functions. The achievement of domain consensus, or agreement about the appropriate role and scope of each member organization in the inter-organizational arrangement, is a necessary prerequisite for building cooperative interaction processes in the IOR. Furthermore, effective collaborative arrangements will develop in an IOR only when the inter-organizational transactions are not dependent upon the use of power and status differentials among member organizations.

Member organizations in the Massachusetts voluntary collaboratives agreed on the legitimacy of each participant's role in the problem-solving activities of the IOR. In addition, they identified the following relational behaviors as necessary in order to reach domain consensus in the inter-organizational arrangement:

- Member organizations have clear sets of expectations about the boundaries within which the collaborative's jurisdiction may be extended
- Participating organizations use membership in the collaborative as a vehicle through which they can initiate change in their individual organizations

Finally, organizations such as local education agencies and regional education agencies that appear to operate in similar domains may need to be particularly careful in negotiations around the domains that are shared, as well as the domains that are reserved to each IOR member.

By extension, the achievement of domain consensus in an IOR may be dependent upon clear understandings about the degree of compatibility of member organizations' goals, reference orientations and philosophies. Because of their deep roots in the different organizational cultures of the participants, problems surfacing from these different orientations are very likely to create conflicts which interfere with the cooperative interaction process in the IOR. Therefore, IOR planners need to establish agreed upon lines of authority before the IOR programs are operationalized.

On the other hand, there are times when regional education agency administrators may wish to use an IOR with local school systems as a means of deliberately permeating traditional school system lines of authority --perhaps in the interests of conducting a particular school improvement project. Benson (1975) has suggested that the primary function of an IOR is the pursuit of authority and money, each of which is viewed as a resource. Authority provides the organization with a way to legitimize its activities and an assurance of its rights to be involved in all aspects of the IOR's activities.

Characteristics of the IOR Interaction Processes: A Summary. Simply stated, the ways in which IOR members relate to each other and to the IOR as well as the ways in which the IOR relates to its member organizations, are crucial to achieving a collaborative inter-organizational arrangement. All the guidelines for planning that I have outlined here today contribute to designing a REA - school system formal relationship that will use collaborative decision-making processes to define and meet IOR goals. Thus, it is important that member representatives bring to the joint effort the official sanction and support of their home organizations for the inter-organizational arrangement. Also,

when IOR members interact in order to develop a joint activity, resources will be exchanged. Participating organizations will both contribute resources to the IOR activity or function, and receive resources from the IOR activity or function. As long as each member believes that the exchange between what is received and what is given to the IOR is equitable, then collaborative decision-making may be achieved. In order for the exchange to be perceived as equitable, members will also have to agree on their respective spheres of influence in the meeting of IOR goals. The manner in which participating organizations share the IOR authority will also predict and provide the degree of collaborative interaction present in the IOR.

When IOR members' organizational prerogatives have been factored into the inter-organizational relationship, the IOR planner will have achieved a base level of agreement upon which more intensive interactions and more complex linkages can be developed and planned, to the benefit of the individuals and organizations involved. Admittedly, establishing collaborative inter-organizational relationships is a time-consuming activity; on the other hand, collaborative IORs contain the complexity of ties and the collaborative decision-making processes that are required to build a high trust factor into an inter-organizational arrangement. It is the presence of this high trust factor that will allow REAs to use their inter-organizational arrangements to accomplish school improvement activities --and thus to realize the full potential of their unique position in the educational service delivery system.

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